

Creating a More Diverse, Equitable, and Inclusive Garden

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As the gap between the alt-right and alt-left broadens, diversity, equity and inclusion have been hot topics of discussion and the public garden sector has not shied away from the growing conversation. As a part of the public gardens leadership fellowship program in the field of horticulture, I have decided to hone in on this conversation by supporting the IDEA committee, of the American Public Gardens Association, with piloting the “Creating a More Diverse, Equitable, and Inclusive Garden” workshop. It has become apparent that there is a need for actionable steps that public gardens can take to become more welcoming for their visitors, staff, and volunteers. The “Creating a More Diverse, Equitable, and Inclusive Garden” workshop was born from this need. Based on a foundation of positive organizational scholarship, this workshop has been developed so that any garden can adapt the activities based on their particular needs and resources, resulting in manageable action steps towards becoming a more diverse and inclusive space for visitors, staff, and volunteers. The workshop is fueled by appreciative inquiry, collaboration from all departments and stakeholders, and creativity. Gardens that are committed to diversity and inclusion and are ready to make serious, sometimes radical change will benefit from the workshop.

In supporting the IDEA committee on piloting this workshop, I had three major responsibilities. The first was creating a webinar that introduced the gardens to the concept of appreciative inquiry and the activities in the workshop. Appreciative Inquiry is a method of problem solving which honors the specific strengths of an organization. Unlike the traditional method of deficit-based change, appreciative inquiry takes a positive, strengths-based change approach. Appreciative inquiry focuses on leveraging an organization's “positive core” strengths to design and redesign the systems within an organization to achieve a more effective and sustainable future. Appreciative Inquiry initiatives are implemented using the 4-D Cycle:

Discovery (Identifying and appreciating what works), Dream (Imagining ‘what could be’), Design (Determining ‘what should be’) and Destiny (Creating ‘what will be’). The 4-D cycle is an anchor for everything from a one-on-one conversation to whole system change. It leverages our best experiences and local wisdom, stimulates creativity, and builds energy and commitment to change. The activity that accompanies the Discovery stage is the sharing of the high point story. In this activity participants reflect individually on their professional experience regarding a time they felt that they could be their authentic selves, such as contributing new ideas to a project, sharing personal details about themselves, or felt an equal part of a group. They then share their high point story with a partner and record the key elements of the story that contributed to it being a positive experience. In the Dream stage, groups will discuss their ideal vision of diversity, equity, and inclusion, as if they awoke from a deep sleep and awoke five years in the future. They should consider what the garden, as it currently stands, could achieve within five years if the proper resources, expertise, and strategy appeared. As each group crafts a news story, they will need to create concrete steps that the Garden would need to take to reach this future, such as securing a major grant, creating a new position, or constructing a new garden area. This activity might be considered an “achievable dream.” At a minimum, they should have a headline and sub headline of a fictional newspaper article, as well as concrete actions taken and important connections that could facilitate this future. In the Design stage, groups will begin to identify areas of strategic opportunity that would move towards a more diverse and inclusive Garden. During this activity, groups are charged with coming up with as many ideas as possible regarding the Garden’s current areas of opportunity as it relates to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Where the previous activity was creating a vision of the ideal future, this activity begins to translate that vision into an immediate action step. Groups will consider what needs to

be done now to achieve that ideal vision, answering the question: “Assuming anything imaginable is possible, what are our key strategic opportunities concerning diversity and inclusion throughout the Garden?” After sharing ideas, they will hone in on the top three strategic opportunities identified by the group. Participants will work to further develop these ideas into actionable steps, considering how existing resources and strengths of the organization can be leveraged, and new initiatives that could be launched soon to work towards the ideal vision of a diverse, inclusive, and equitable garden. Then, each group will present a two-minute report on their top “prototypes,” details about the initiative, and context on how they arrived at this decision. Finally, in the Destiny phase, each group will develop their strongest prototype into an action plan that will be implemented at the Garden. Groups should keep in mind that this action plan needs to be grounded in reality. If the proposed action plan requires money, facilities, or other resources not realistically achievable, the group is thinking too large. The action plan should include resources and assets readily available or a sustainable plan to acquire them. The group should also consider what their individual commitments are to this plan. This can be specific to their job function at the Garden or their personal knowledge, skills, or expertise.

My second responsibility was conducting interviews with staff from Brooklyn Botanic Garden, Denver Botanic Gardens and Bellevue Botanic Garden to create a case study. These interviews spotlight these gardens and their programs that address equity and provide insight into the initiatives they have taken on as a result. The takeaways for participants will be to learn about initiatives at other gardens and learn how to implement the workshop at their own garden. This case study that I have created is included in the manual for the workshop.

Finally, my last responsibility was recording the journey of the IDEA workshop by creating a video documentary. I interviewed leaders from Sarah P. Duke Gardens, Tower Hill

Botanic Garden and Paul J. Ceiner Botanical Garden to get a sense of what drew them to facilitate the workshop, what outcomes they hoped to achieve and what their ideal garden would look like in the future. However, Sarah P. Duke Gardens and Paul J. Ceiner dropped out of piloting the workshop. After Tower Hill Botanic Garden completed the workshop, I did a follow up interview to see how their experience was, what worked and what didn't, what outcomes were achieved, and would they recommend the workshop to other organizations. Tower Hill had an excellent experience with our IDEA workshop. They are in the process of implementing three action plans as a direct result of the workshop. Their first action plan was to create ADA accessible paths throughout the garden. Their second action plan is that they have decided to start a new board program called corporators. The idea of this program is that it is an intermediary step before getting on the board. This program encourages people who may not be able to be on the board to become advocates for the garden and allows them to still have meaningful contributions. Their third action plan is focused on staff recruitment; they are working on changing the language in the job description to be more inclusive.

From this project I have helped address an issue in the public garden field regarding equity, inclusion, diversity and accessibility in public gardens. This workshop has been presented at the APGA conference and is available for all gardens to use to help them become more welcoming for their visitors, staff, and volunteers. Through Tower Hill Botanic Garden, we see that it brings meaningful results and the workshop can be successful.